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## **The Express-Times**

# **Easton partnering with water authority to target delinquent sewer accounts**

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By EDWARD SIEGER

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**EASTON** | In an ongoing crusade to crack down on delinquent taxpayers, the city is turning to Easton Suburban Water Authority to help collect overdue sewer bills.

Easton Suburban Manager Roy White said the city and authority have been discussing sewer shutoffs since the authority began operating Easton's water system.

Sewer authorities in Palmer, Forks, Williams and Bethlehem townships and Wilson and West Easton boroughs currently use Easton Suburban as an enforcing authority, White said. Easton Suburban has forwarded a copy of its sewer shutoff agreement to the city, he said.

City Solicitor William Murphy said an agreement has yet to be finalized, and he did not know when city council may receive an agreement for approval.

Finance Director Chris Heagele said roughly \$2.1 million in sewer, trash and old water delinquencies sit on the city books. Easton's current software does not separate the various types of delinquencies.

### Inside the numbers

Of delinquent accounts, 239 totaling more than \$2,500 each represent a little more than \$1 million in delinquent fees. Portnoff Law Associates is handling collection efforts on 32 "big dollar accounts" totaling \$170,000, Heagele said.

Six accounts totaling \$26,000 are attached to properties in foreclosure, and the city will collect once the properties are sold, Heagele said. Four accounts totaling \$13,300 have entered payment plans, and another \$30,000 in delinquencies for six properties is in bankruptcy, he said.

The finance department is sifting through another 177 accounts totaling about \$625,000 to determine the status, including whether they're in bankruptcy or foreclosure, Heagele said.

Roughly 900 accounts totaling less than \$2,500 each make up another roughly \$1 million in delinquencies, which the city will continue to target through letters and phone calls, Heagele said. But every delinquent sewer account could be subject to a water shutoff once an agreement with Easton Suburban is in place, he said.

"We have 1,100 accounts, and we need to collect all of them," Heagele said.

City plans to step up enforcement on late bills

The city would prefer to forgo legal action in favor of establishing payment plans with property owners, Heagele said. He noted the city freezes interest and penalties once a payment plan is executed, and the property owner remains up to date on the plan and current fees.

City Administrator Glenn Steckman said the Easton Suburban agreement will be part of a stepped-up collection effort next year that will include reviewing all existing municipal liens to determine if it's cost-effective to execute the lien.

The deliberate failure to pay fees and taxes is not fair, for instance, to tenants who dutifully pay their utility bills only to have landlords not pay the city, Steckman said.

"We're willing to work with people. We realize these are tough times, but some of these debts are old," he said. "We're going to make it very clear that we want to get paid."

Since leasing the city's entire water system, the water authority has been aggressively pursuing delinquent water accounts in Easton, and water shutoffs and delinquent accounts in the city have leveled off since the beginning of the year, according to customer relations manager Erin Schulberger.

The water authority had already begun working with the city by agreeing not to restore water service for customers with delinquent sewer or garbage fees.

Easton Suburban shuts off water service for 50 to 75 residential accounts a month for non-payment of sewer bills across the authority's territory.

Individual sewer authorities are required to mail their own delinquency notices before Easton Suburban sends out notices water service will be shut off in 10 days unless payment is made. Easton Suburban then calls each sewer authority the morning shutoffs are scheduled to double check the list, Schulberger said.

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